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GUEST COMMENTARY: A healthy start to ring in new school year



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Provided

John Kennedy is director of business development for American Structurepoint and serves as vice chairman of the Lake Area United Way board of directors.

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Can you believe it's time to think about sending your kids back to school?

Setting earlier bedtimes, packing lunches, passing school bus stops that are once again occupied by kids carrying backpacks filled with new supplies are sure signs that summer is over and it's time to look forward to the new school year.

As the second week of August begins, some region students will be starting their transition into the new academic year, with others to soon follow in the weeks to come. New routines will be established, homework

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regimens will be set, after-school activities will gear up, and parent orientation nights are just around the corner.

Did your kids have a healthy summer? Were they able to maintain a healthy level of physical activity during the out-of-school months? Students who are physically fit generally perform better on statewide testing, especially in the crucial areas of reading and math. These kids also miss fewer days of school.

Did you know the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends school-aged children complete 60 minutes or more of physical activity each day? The CDC recommends that aerobic exercise, such as brisk walking, bike riding or running, should make up most of the 60 minutes at least three days a week. Muscle and bone strengthening activities should also be included to round out your child's weekly exercise plan.

Exercise promotes a healthy body weight, supports learning and the development of social skills. It also builds self-esteem.

Similarly, you may be familiar with United Way's partnership with the NFL on its "Play 60" campaign. You may have seen players from the Chicago Bears or Indianapolis Colts challenging kids to "get moving" in local media ads and commercials. The latest research on childhood obesity underscores the measurable progress in communities where your local United Ways and other organizations are convening resources to advance youth health. Across the country, NFL teams and players are working with these organizations to increase access to nutritious foods for families and increase opportunities for physical exercise and play.

Have you ever considered your local YMCA, YWCA, Boys' & Girls' Clubs or other community agency programs as a way to help your kids stay active and involved? These providers throughout the region offer convenient, affordable, safe and dependable solutions for working families.

Are your child's nutrition habits on the right track to ensure success in school? Does your child start the day with a healthy breakfast? Students who eat breakfast tend to have higher attendance records, score higher on tests and exhibit better concentration. Do you use their school's lunch program? For many parents, school breakfasts and lunches are affordable, convenient ways to make sure your child is eating regular and balanced meals.

The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics offers several simple tips to help kick off the school year, which include: starting the day off with a healthy breakfast, becoming familiar with your school's menu; asking for nutrition information about menu items from the school food service director; reviewing the monthly menu with your child; challenging them to try new foods and making balanced choices in the cafeteria lines; encouraging school clubs and parent associations to serve healthy snacks and drinks for events, school parties and as the preferred choices in vending machines.



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Situations arise, and families sometimes lack the financial means to access nutritious foods. Rest assured that you can contact area resources such as your local food pantry, Northwest Indiana Community Action or the Indiana Parenting Institute, who often can provide assistance.

Finally, make sure your choices reflect a positive lifestyle. We know children learn by example. Let's make this year's transition from "pool to school" a healthy one with habits to last year round.

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